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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Domestic Politics Update: Meeting between PM-presidential aide stirs questions; MPs acting badly

Refs: Colombo 975, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons: 1.5 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) This update of Sri Lanka's domestic political situation reviews the following:

-- In meeting, prime minister and key presidential aide reportedly discuss coalition government

-- Supreme Court ruling puts provincial chief ministers in jeopardy

-- Sri Lanka debates whether to lift long-standing moratorium and re-impose the death penalty

-- Cricket board election hurts political prospects of Opposition's bright new star

-- Governing party MPs acting badly

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Coalition Government Discussed?
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[1](#)2. (C) There are reports that the GSL and the Opposition may have discussed forming a coalition government. Key presidential advisor Lakshman Kadirgamar was reported to have proposed a coalition between the president's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the ruling United National Front (UNF) during talks with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe on June 6. (Note: The SLFP is the key constituent element of the People's Alliance party. Kadirgamar is a former foreign minister.) The press reports also indicate that President Kumaratunga was considering naming Kadirgamar as "interim prime minister" under this coalition proposition. In remarks cited by the press on June 8, Kadirgamar denied the "coalition proposal" report. Early June 9, presidential spokesman Harim Peiris gave some validity to the report, telling us that the concept of the SLFP and UNF working closer together "probably surfaced" during the PM-Kadirgamar discussion. Peiris stressed, however, that the conversation probably did not involve a proposal for a joint government.

[1](#)3. (C) COMMENT: What exactly took place during the PM/Kadirgamar discussion is a bit mysterious. In the past, there has been off-and-on talk of the two major parties, i.e., the UNF and the SLFP, forming some sort of "national" government, but those proposals went nowhere. In fact, the SLFP has been discussing a formal alignment with the radical Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party of late, which would preclude a link with the UNF. While it is possible that the reports are some sort of trial balloon put out by someone, our guess is that a UNF-SLFP linkage is not in the cards at this point, as there is too much bad blood between the two sides. END COMMENT.

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Ruling re Chief Ministers
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[1](#)4. (C) In a ruling with potentially wide political ramifications, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court has ruled against the legality of the chief minister of Uva province's right to hold his office. (Note: FYI. Uva is a tea growing region located in Sri Lanka's southeast.) The ruling stated that the minister, a member of the opposition People's Alliance (PA) party, was not eligible to be nominated for the vacancy because he was not originally a candidate during the 1999 provincial council election. While the ruling technically addresses only the Uva province chief minister's slot, two other PA-party chief ministers (for the Western and the North-Central provinces) were selected in the same way that the court ruled against. We understand that the Uva chief minister is planning to appeal the ruling.

15. (C) COMMENT: Sri Lanka has seven provincial councils, with the PA controlling six of them. The provincial councils and their chief minister positions are not very powerful at this time. That could change, especially if the GSL and the Tamil Tigers agree to form a semi-autonomous set-up in the north/east, which could lead to devolved powers in the rest of the country. In any case, the ruling is a black eye for the PA, which controls most of the councils now. President Kumaratunga is said to be upset by the ruling and considering next steps. END COMMENT.

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Death penalty debate
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16. (C) Sri Lanka continues to debate whether to lift a long-standing moratorium and re-impose the death penalty. A parliamentary debate recently took place on the issue. The June 5 debate was introduced by eight MPs from the ruling UNF who are in favor of bringing the death penalty back. The eight argued that Sri Lanka has a law-and-order problem and needs the death penalty as a deterrent. Other UNF members, including Foreign Minister Tyronne Fernando, stated their opposition to the death penalty. MPs from the opposition People's Alliance (PA) also came down on both sides of the issue. Regarding President Kumaratunga's views, presidential spokesman Harim Peiris is quoted as saying the president continues to oppose the death penalty.

17. (C) COMMENT: Sri Lanka has not had an execution since 1976 and it is not likely to have one anytime soon in spite of the debate on the issue. Even if the UNF government decides that the death penalty should be brought back (and it is not clear where the PM stands on the issue), the matter is ultimately in the hands of the president, who, per Peiris' comments, seems dead set against re-imposition. All that said, some in the UNF are genuinely worried by rising crime -- and also clearly see a lot of political mileage to be gained by raising the issue and using it to get at the president. END COMMENT.

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Cricket Board election hurts Opposition Star
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18. (C) The June 6 election of officers for Sri Lanka's national cricket board has hurt the political prospects of the Opposition's bright new star. (Note: The technical name of the body is "Board of Control for Cricket in Sri Lanka." The election involved the tabulation of votes of members of cricket clubs around the country.) In the election for president of the board, Arjuna Ranatunga, an MP for the president's People's Alliance (PA) party, lost the race in decisive manner, polling less than five percent of the votes. The loss was a bitter defeat for Ranatunga, a well-known former cricketer, who as captain of the team led Sri Lanka to the 1996 world championship. The winner of the race, Thilanga Sumathipala, is a businessman, who maintains close ties with the governing UNF.

19. (C) COMMENT: Cricket is Sri Lanka's most popular sport, maintaining the combined popularity that our "big four" sports -- football, baseball, basketball, ice hockey -- have all wrapped into one. As such, the cricket board presidency is a very prestigious job, which has been held in the past by powerful politicians, including Foreign Minister Tyronne Fernando. The fact that Ranatunga, a protege of President Kumaratunga, lost the race in a landslide dulls his political star a bit. That said, Ranatunga is good on the hustings and could recover a bit of his previous lustre over time. It is not clear whether or not the winner of the race, Thilanga Sumathipala, has political ambitions. END COMMENT.

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Governing Party MPs acting badly
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110. (C) A recent spate of alleged criminal activities by parliamentarians has hit the newspapers. Almost all of the cases involve members of the UNF governing coalition, although there have been some involving members of other parties. Recent incidents include:

-- On June 6, Minister of Fisheries Mahinda Wijesekara is alleged to have publicly threatened a reporter who wrote a negative article about the minister some 18 months ago. The incident allegedly took place at a local restaurant. Wijesekara, with a bit of a wink and a nod, has repeatedly denied threatening the reporter.

-- June 1 newspaper reports accused Minister of State Transport Upali Piyasoma with assisting visa fraud. Piyasoma was accused of interfering with his daughter's effort to obtain a visa to the UK by telling lies about her status. She was ultimately refused a visa.

-- On May 25, UNF MP Dulip Wedaarchi fired shots outside a wedding reception at a hotel in Colombo. No one was injured in the firing. Wedaarchi said he was upset and decided to shoot off his gun.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: The prime minister is said to be very angry over these reports and has called for his party to create a code of conduct for MPs. A draft code is currently being hashed out. Few people, however, believe that the proposed code will put a stop to such incidents. Indeed, if past patterns hold up, some observers expect that the incidents will continue to pile up the longer the government is in power. (Note: By the end of its time in power in late 2001, the previous PA government -- which had already been in power for seven years -- was experiencing a recurring nightmare of violence-tinged incidents involving MPs. These incidents seriously hurt its reputation.) END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) Minimize considered.

AMSELEM